

# A PROPOSAL: “AGRO-ERASMUS”

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## Abstract

The rural population is getting smaller as percentage of the total population in the countries. There is a constant depopulation of rural areas to urban areas. The most extreme data are in countries like USA, where the rural population is 1.5%, from which 1% of that amount is part time and only 0.5% full time. On the other side, we have countries with more than 50% rural population.

Related to training, cultural development, business and specific weight in society, rural residents have no significance in their societies. As they are few, and separated across the territory they have no influence on their societies.

Comparing the USA farmer with one from the EU, we see that the American one is a businessperson and the European one, in most cases is a farm worker.

To reduce this gap between these different farmers, we believe that we must train the new generations of children belonging to farming Europe. They must have a common language, English; they must know other countries culture and farming systems, live and network with other young Europeans colleagues, future young farmers.

It is what we have coined as AGRO-ERASMUS. A project to be placed within the EU Common Agriculture Policies.

The project must be designed before its implementation. Even some previous experience should make better viability.

It should make use of a **network of agricultural universities** in several European countries. Each university would build a "farm school" where young people would learn "English", and visit and work in small agricultural practices with a correct use of the time. One important subject dealing with should be agribusiness.

The procedure based on the "Farm School" (F-S) experience, should start with young people from 13 years up to 18 years. Their attendance, every summer, to the F-S should be rotated between different countries besides their own.

The first and second year, with young people 13/14 years old, the Farm School would last less than three weeks in an English speaking country (Ireland, UK or

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someone else). They should live with a local family the time they stay outside of the Farm School (F-S). This two years period must be devoted to learn and become familiar with the English language and cultural differences. The rest of the four years left, the Farm Schools will have longer duration and be placed in other countries from the network.

The living way would be in multinational teams of young people where the only spoken language would be English. After six years of summer coexistence speaking English and learning new competences and skills with colleagues from other countries, we would have a great team of young and future European farmers, able to travel free and confident through the whole Europe and ready to be engaged in productive, commercial and research activities. These new young farmers may revive European agriculture and would not look any more like rural habitants, but international business-farmers, professionally speaking.

In a brief survey among the assistants to the Fifth International Academic Conference titled "Alternative Income Sources in Small Agricultural Holdings of the European Union" held in Krakow (PL) in June 2015, participants from universities and countries like Poland, Hungary, Rep. Czech, Portugal, Romania, etc., expressed the necessity of addressing this problem in a new and bold way.

### **Keywords**

Erasmus, Young Farmers Training, Farm-Schools, Rural Areas, Agribusiness.

### **1.-Introduction**

The change process required in the future of the agro-food scenario in Europe will not happen without a new generation of global farmers, which today are still at school age [Genious et al 2008] [Sullivan 1996].

The young people leaving in rural environment and farming families have a lower expectation about their future than the urban young have, and lag behind in the access to higher levels of education, like university or technical colleges. Offcourse this differences range between European member states, according to the GDP per person and rate of farming versus industry and services [Niewolny et al 2010] [Irvine et al 2011] [Farmer 1987].

To change this situation a more collaborative and inclusive strategy is needed, That will rise the expectation of young farmers to higher levels of education within a global focus, for the future role of a modern farming, with more business focused and internationally centred, and with languages competences [Kabir 2007].

Several programs are already in place in Europe and elsewhere. However, all of them have some missing aspects. Either, focusing in young farmers, which are

already working in farms, or focusing in university and technical college students, which don't have a strong farm relation, but all of them young adults.

Not program seems to focus in the upcoming young from farming and rural origin, still at school. Is there where we propose the necessity of a "Young Farmers School" with a similar approach to Erasmus, for agricultural or rural "teenagers". This is the "Agro-Erasmus" proposal.

The best examples of Agricultural Erasmus are WHITE in Ireland and CAEP in USA, which are both NGO organizations.

**WHITE (Work Experience Housing Internship Training Erasmus)** [White in Ireland 2012] is a program linked with European Erasmus+ students with prior agricultural experience or agricultural education training. The internship is unpaid and has a stay up to 6 weeks. The student will live with the farmer family participating in the family functions and participate in the Irish agricultural way of life. The host farmer will have learnt from the candidates also about their agriculture and culture. The ranging areas of agriculture – farming considered are: Dairy farms, Landscaping, Cattle Breeding, Equine Stables, Pig Farms, Hen Farms, Organic Farming, Horticulture, and Sheep Industry.

The program has three main objectives:

- **Language skills.** Helping the international candidate to improve the English language knowledge and work related language skills.
- **Professional skills.** Having the opportunity to learn more about Irish agriculture and farming. They will acquire valuable work experience in the chosen career and gain confidence in their ability to work in an English-speaking environment.
- **Cultural knowledge.** The student will get to know Irish people both at work and socially. The participants of these programs will have the possibility to learn more about the Irish culture and way of life, and developing lifelong friendships.

**CAEP (Communicating for Agriculture Education Programs)** [CAEP 2015], which started in 1972 as an association of dairy farmers in Minnesota, carried out the vision of providing young adults an opportunity to experience the world through agricultural exchange, while providing hosting rural families to be touched by other cultures, resulting in lifelong friendships. Stays are between 3 to 12 months in USA or other CAEP host countries, and are paid international internships. Participants are agriculture companies and farms, in agriculture; nurseries, wineries and horse operations, ranging in more than 30 options. Students are qualified and accredited in agriculture by a post-secondary institution in their own country of origin.

As CAEP program is based on "**work and learn**" experience, students are advised into the adequate educational track, which can include for larger stays

(12 months) a work/training program, attending the second half of the time an adequate educational institution.

The European Commission is addressing in the action programs different initiatives oriented to create young farmers exchange programs. To be mentioned are the **Exchange Program for Young Farmers (Pilot)** [European Commission DG Agriculture and Rural Development 2012] from the **General Directorate for Agriculture and Rural Development**, and the **Youth for Europe Action Program** from the **EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Cultural Executive Agency) General Directorate of Education and Culture** [AECEA 2013].

The Youth for Europe actions include Youth Exchanges and Youth Initiatives that offer an opportunity for groups of young people from different countries to meet and learn about each other. In addition, support networked projects between different countries to exchange experiences between young people, aged from 13 to 30 years. However, these actions provide the opportunity for young farmers' education.

The Pilot Project Exchange Program for Young Farmers includes in Theme 2 the Overview of Exchange Schemes in the UE. This should include individual and group farm visits, participation in demonstration projects, internships, apprenticeships and similar actions. The results of such an overview should provide the economic support, legal aspects, cultural aspects, and farmers' benefits from the exchanges that would underpin the Agro-Erasmus initiative.

## **2. MODEL DESCRIPTION**

The model coined as "Agro-Erasmus" ("AE") is an idea that makes sense now and is developing gradually as people related to the rural world and training, know and get excited about it.[CAP,2013]

It intends to use the image and the advantages that the Erasmus Program, now extended to other learning scenarios in Erasmus plus [Erasmus, 2014], has had and still has among university students by facilitating the exchange between the universities of different European countries. Its integrating effect has been awesome and has made a great contribution to cohesion and understanding of European youth. It has been the best seed and planting to achieve better cooperation between nations that constitute the EU.

In the previous point, we have seen other approaches attempting to develop and integrate young people in agriculture in the EU, but none has been set in the children or young farmers. It is from them that we have to base our European agriculture for the near future. That is the rationale and intended "Agro-Erasmus Program" target audience.

## **2.1 WHAT IS AGRO-ERASMUS (A-E).**

It would work with students, children of EU farmers, with ages from 13 up to 18 years, using only English language, from different nationalities living in a "farm school" and creating a lifelong friendship links, networking, between them.

This ultimate goal, creating bonds of friendship and networks [Mailfert 2007] between different nationalities, will allow them, when they reach the 18 years, being able to reach many of the EU countries without language barriers and knowing the basic features of the culture of each country. These young people, who have spent six years living with colleagues in and from other countries, will be the architects of the new agribusiness ideas inter countries, and the real entrepreneurs of a new network of European agricultural business. The basic and profound reform of agriculture will become true through professional training, knowledge of English and culture, of different countries which constitute the "Agro-Erasmus" network.(A-E Program).

Let have a look to the structure of the "A-E" Program.

The idea is to be focused on countries and universities related to agriculture and close to the farming world in the EU.

Each university will operate a "farm school" ("F-S") where the students meet in summer, from different European countries. The University will have a team of "trainers" that guide the students and manage the "F-S" in summer. The summer weather makes easier traveling between countries.

Teaching and practice of agriculture will be encouraged in the F-S, and always in English. The agricultural work will be more didactical at leisure and coexistence as personal work. Tours around the zone and the various farming and agribusiness will be carried out. English language education should be the priority of F-S.

The length of stay in the F-S depends on the student's age. (See Table 1).

The start will be when the student is 13 and finish at the age of 18 years old. As the initial objective is to learn English, the first two summers of F-S will be in Ireland, UK, or any other European English speaking country. The students will be accommodated in families.

**Table 1: STAY IN FARM – SCHOOL (F-S)**

<b>Age of children (years)</b>	<b>Weeks number</b>	<b>Host Countries</b>
13 other.	2 weeks	Ireland, UK or
14 other.	3 weeks	Ireland, UK or
15	4 weeks	Other countries EU
16	5 weeks	Idem
17	6 weeks	Idem
18	Two months	Idem.

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Source: Authors

## **2.2 NETWORK OF UNIVERSITIES AND F-S.**

The different universities in different countries will constitute a network of universities A-E. The network would include different agricultural associations (unions, cooperatives, training schools, vocational training, etc.) as partners with the country universities.

Advocacy and outreach must be very strong to go attracting parents and that they encourage their children to learn English while traveling abroad alone.

For each F-S, and age group, educational material would have to be elaborated including the English language education.

## **2.3 STRUCTURE OF THE OPERATION PROGRAM A-E.**

To get an idea of how would be in the future the structure of this program, it will have:

1.- Agricultural University Network with F-S across the EU.

1.1.- There will be an Annual National Meeting, and an Annual European Meeting, in all participant countries with F-S, on a rotating basis.

2.- Associated network of Agricultural Partners in each country.

2.1.- Working as partners of the F-S network under the university coordination.

3. Associated European Network of Public Institutions, at national and regional level, including whenever possible National Agricultural Offices.

4.- A permanent coordination and Management Group at European level from the Consortium Members.

## 2.4 ACTIVITIES DURING THE YEAR.-

### WINTER:

National program planning in coordination with Program Management would propose and distribute applying students who will go next summer to different F-S.

### SUMMER:

Educational and training activities will be carried out in the F-S's and in universities of designated countries. Advanced students in English will be able to progress to the TOEFL certificate.

## 2.5.- OTHER ASPECTS.-

The coordination of A-E Program should have two components. Firstly the **educational component** based on the **English language** knowledge, because they are going to be trained as young students (13-18 years). Secondly the **agricultural**, because they are children or young farmers, who will continue **dealing with Agriculture**.

The agricultural component fits in the CAP Pillar II. [CAP, 2013]. We believe that the financing of this potential Agro-Erasmus Program could be covered the CAP (Common Agricultural Policy by European Commission). The educational component is inserted which is best in the EACEA, under the General Directorate for Education and Culture. And maybe it would be a very appropriate program within the group of ERASMUS +, of the EACEA. [Erasmus, 2014]

Once, the proposal has been more elaborated, the universities that have expressed their desire of cooperation in the Fifth International Academic Conference "Alternative Income Sources in Small Agricultural Holdings of the European Union" held in Krakow (PL) in June 2015, and others Institutions that will join subsequently, shall constitute the pilot program. Which being a European Union Program will be under Brussels Program Model. Considering a target pilot to start countries such as Poland, Hungary, Check Republik, Eslovakia, Portugal, Romania, and other Central European Countries, which have a very powerful practice in Agricultural Universities, and in Regional Development Faculties, like Mendel University in Brno.

## 3.- CONCLUSSIONS.

There is a necessity to address school age youngsters (teenagers), from farming families to empower them for a new role in the global food-supply farming scenario.



Experiences about young farmers exchange programmes for training and education are not fully developed but actual projects are very encouraging, in particular those related to the Erasmus Program.

Agro-Erasmus is now in the right timing. So, should be launched an initiative in this direction by the European Universities related to Agricultural education, starting with the Eastern Europe countries.

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